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SUBJECT: SOMALIA - Local Media Reaction to Secretary-Sharif Meeting

REF: NAIROBI 1686

Summary

¶1. (SBU) Somali and Kenyan media coverage of the August 6 meeting between Secretary Clinton and Transitional Federal Government (TFG) President Sheikh Sharif Sheikh Ahmed was largely positive. Predictably, opposition figures used the media to register opposition to the meeting, saying the United States has fanned the conflict in Somalia, with one opinion piece framing the meeting "not [as] a meeting between a head of a state and a Secretary of a state but a briefing of an operative by his handlers." Still other media outlets focused not on the historic meeting, but dwelled on the purported significance of the handshake between the Secretary and Sharif prior to and after the meeting (reftel). End Summary.

Somali Media Reaction

¶2. (SBU) Somali media coverage of the August 6 meeting between Secretary Clinton and Transitional Federal Government (TFG) President Sheikh Sharif Sheikh Ahmed was largely positive. Most Somali outlets focused on the historic nature of the meeting, noting that this was the first meeting between a U.S. Secretary of State and a TFG President. The most prominently highlighted points were the Secretary's promise of increased, though unspecified, U.S. aid to Somalia, and both leaders' assertions that Eritrea must cease its detrimental activities with respect to Somalia. An additional highlight was the Secretary's affirmation of unwavering U.S. support to the TFG. A sampling of articles on Somali media outlets was sent to AF on August 7.

¶3. (SBU) Predictably, opposition figures used the meeting as an opportunity to denounce the TFG and President Sharif. One website reported that the spokesman of the Islamic administration of Kismayo criticized the meeting, claiming that the U.S. was perpetuating the conflict in Somalia and that the meeting "did not produce any results that were beneficial to the Somali people." The spokesman added that the United States was inflicting suffering upon Muslims everywhere and said that it was important for Muslims to be vigilant against the U.S. treachery. An opinion piece on another website asked if the Secretary's point that "al-Shabaab not only uses foreign fighters and foreign money, but foreign ideas" was in fact referring to the TFG, given the TFG's purported dependence on African Union Mission to Somalia (AMISOM) troops, who come from outside of Somalia.

¶4. (SBU) Owing to both the location of the meeting and the escalating interest in Somalia by its southern neighbor, Kenyan media also covered the meeting extensively. Capital FM radio prominently featured the Secretary's mention that Kenya is threatened by the insecurity provoked by al-Shabaab, as well as her note that Kenya hosts nearly 300,000 Somali refugees. The two largest daily newspapers in Nairobi also highlighted U.S. support for the TFG and the calls for Eritrea to cease its support for extremism in Somalia, but also noted the meeting between Sharif and Kenyan President Kibaki. Notably, a story about the bilateral meeting in The Nation on August 7 was carried deep into the paper, on page 20. A commentary in the same paper focused on the spillover effects of the Somalia conflict, including the refugees and possibility that Somalia-based extremists may again launch an attack in Kenya. The August 8 edition of The Nation drew a link between the Secretary's meeting with Sharif and Kenya's decision to expel an Eritrean diplomat. An editorial in the August 10 edition of the East African, a mainstream weekly newspaper, noted that Secretary Clinton continues to grapple with Somalia, over a decade after former President Clinton withdrew U.S. forces from Somalia.

The Handshake

¶5. (SBU) The media, especially in Somalia, continued to pay a great deal of attention to the handshakes between Secretary Clinton and Sharif before and after the historic meeting (reftel). An opinion

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piece on a Puntland-based website offered an effusive recounting of the handshake, noting that "the handshake is a slap in the face of extremism." Many outlets carried a photo of one of the handshakes, which took place during the photo spray and again when the joint press conference concluded. Sharif had donned a lapel pin featuring the U.S. and Somali flags; the pin was readily visible in the photos on the media reports.

RANNEBERGER